

February 6, 2023

State of Connecticut Office of Early Childhood  
Committee on Children  
450 Columbus Blvd.  
Hartford, CT 06103

Testimony of Michael P. Walsh, Mayor of the Town of East Hartford  
Presented by: Connor Martin, Chief of Staff

RE: Raised Bill No. 6574 An Act Concerning Municipal Youth Camps

Members of the Committee on Children,

My name is Connor Martin, Chief of Staff representing Mayor Michael P. Walsh, Town of East Hartford. The purpose of this document is to testify in opposition to House Bill No. 6574. For those not familiar with the East Hartford community, let me share some background that will help inform why we are opposed to mandated licensing of municipal youth camps by the Office of Early Childhood.

The Town of East Hartford is fortunate to be comprised of a diverse population of more than 51,000 residents, including more than 11,400 children under 18 years of age. In addition to the mandated services administered by our Town programs, we strive to offer programs that contribute to the quality of life and well-being for our youth. However, the financial challenges many of our residents face limits access to affordable summer options for our children. The median household income in East Hartford is \$55,967, which is 33% lower than the Connecticut average. The poverty rate of East Hartford residents is 15% compared to a 10% rate for the State.

The Town of East Hartford offers a safe and accessible summer program to members of our community. Our Department of Parks & Recreation, with support from other Town programs, including our Fire Department, Police, Library Department, and Health & Human services, oversees a large municipal youth camp that served 705 children at an affordable rate of \$65 per week during 2022. As we prepare for the 2023 youth camp season, we expect the same number of participants as the families we serve rely on our municipal camp program to provide safe, supervised physical activity, nutrition services, access to youth social workers, health education, and an opportunity for social engagement.

The Town of East Hartford opposes the mandate that municipal youth camps comply with licensure requirements administered through the Office of Early Childhood. In addition to our immediate access to health and safety subject matter experts within our

Town departments to assist with planning and operations, our youth camps have several layers of oversight that may not be accessible by private camps, including a full-time, year-round program coordinator that maintains an understanding of camp standards and best practices; Human Resources Department to assist with recruitment and background checks; and Corporate Counsel and Risk Management to address legal standards and appropriate practices to minimize risk to staff and participants. Our Parks & Recreation Department strives for the health and safety of our camp participants through the following practices:

- Employs a sufficient number of counselors to maintain a 1:10 staff ratio;
- Employs more than 60 lifeguards to oversee the safety of children at our seven outdoor pools;
- Conducts background checks on all staff;
- Collaborates with the Department of Youth Services to embed counselors who promote positive social engagement and address behavioral health needs of participants;
- Require more than 20 hours of standardized training for all staff, including CPR/First Aid, Epi-Pen administration, mandated reporter, sexual harassment, blood-borne pathogens training, CRPA Camp College Seminar, motivational speaker, on-site facility training, safe food handling practices, summer program handbook training, Emergency Action Plans, and customer service training; and
- Camp staff responsible for medication administration are required to complete the Medication Administration Certification in compliance with requirements established by the State Department of Public Health.

We are concerned requiring municipal youth camps to be licensed under OEC may result in increased costs, delays in operations due the administration burden, and ultimately placing access barriers to the children and families that are in most need of affordable summer recreation programs. Specific examples of potential challenges we may experience include:

- Staffing and age requirements outlined in the current licensing regulations will require our Parks & Recreation Department to either reduce our hours of operation, combine camp sites to comply, and/or reduce the number of children we enroll. For example, East Hartford operates five camp sites concurrently through the summer program. If a municipality were required to employ at least four 21-year-old directors at each site, we would have to hire 20 young adults. We have struggled for several years to hire young adults to serve as site directors.
- The background checks for all staff mandated in the current regulations costs approximately \$88.00 compared to the current, and sufficient background check that costs our Town \$42.00. The cost difference to conduct background checks for 50 counselors, 60 lifeguards, 5 nurses, and 5 youth services counselors would be \$5,520.00.
- Increasing staff requirements, both in quantity and age will result in higher personnel expenses as well as additional Town resources to recruit, hire and retain qualified personnel.
- We are concerned OEC may not have the staff capacity to assure a timely response for license applications from public and private youth camp programs.

MICHAEL P. WALSH  
MAYOR

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- Licensing issues could lead to delays in camps opening, which impacts families that rely on youth camps to meet work obligations.
- East Hartford offers a financial aid program for families in need of assistance. During the 2022 summer camp season, East Hartford provided 80 weeks of camp subsidies totaling \$5,200.00. The potential higher administrative costs incurred by the Town will reduce the number of children we're able to assist, thus adding a financial barrier to equitable access.

This additional cost burden would result in higher fees passed on to families during a time we're experiencing high gas prices, record utility costs, and higher food costs. Pricing out families, especially our low-income residents with already limited summer program or childcare options, will also result in a negative economic impact to our families if forced to pay higher camp fees or modify their work hours if our youth camp has to reduce hours of operation.

Thank you for your time, and the Town of East Hartford looks forward to working with the committee to address your questions and concerns about safe municipal youth camp operations.

Sincerely,



Michael P. Walsh  
Mayor, Town of East Hartford